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The Image of the West in Life-story Interviews

Narratives of Hungarians Exiled after 1956 about their Flight, on West and East

Theses

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I. Research Objectives, Antecedents

Following the 1956 revolution, Hungary was left by some 200 thousand people. The majority settled in some other country for good, and although many had been planning to return to their native land, few actually would do so after the regime change or 1898-1990. In their life-story interviews the émigrés painted a picture of successful integration into the receiving society (established families, had children and grandchildren born, made a successful career in their trade), and the possibility of resettlement held out little attraction to them in the early 1990s.

The wave of emigration after 1956 may be depicted as one of the major traumas of 20th century Hungarian history. Following the revolution of 1956, the number of people leaving the country was huge, and the rate at which they did so, very rapid compared to the size and population of the county. These people were leaving in an era of cold war when migration was anything but a typical phenomenon. It is one of the fundamentally characteristic features of a totalitarian, Soviet-type regime that it introduces a number of restrictions into people's lives which do not exist in a democratic society. For that reason, travel abroad in the so-called socialist societies was not one of the civil liberties, a citizen's right, but a privilege. By the use of its passport and foreign currency policies, the government arbitrarily determined whom it would and whom it would not allow to travel, and on what conditions. In judging people's applications for an exit visa or a passport, the applicants' behaviour at their workplace was thoroughly checked, and it was investigated whether they were politically "mature" enough to be permitted to leave the country, in other words, if they were not likely to use the occasion for deserting. Therefore the only opportunity for emigration on a massive scale emerged right after 1956. During the socialist period, taking a lengthier job abroad, even with official approval, was possible only in a manner determined by intergovernmental agreements. A slow, gradual change in the official view of tourism, the easing of the harshness of the totalitarian regime, was felt first in the late 1970s when, even though with a limited access to foreign currency, it became possible to travel to the West once in every three years.

That political attitude was undoubtedly a major reason why, in an East-European comparison, Hungary's population in the socialist era showed litter international mobility, even though Hungarian citizens were relatively freer to travel than those in the other countries of the Soviet bloc. Since the regime change in 1989-1990, according to comparative international studies, the rate of employment seekers abroad (*Arbeitsmigration*) has been far lower, and that of emigrants, somewhat lower, than in the other countries in the region.

The number of post-1956 émigrés, both because of the high figures and the extraordinary situation, has become a prominent reference point in Hungary's external relations, be they formal and informal, public or secret.

One of the main objectives of my research was to raise new types of research questions at a site (Vienna) different from those used in the literature so far, and to do so by making use of the possibilities inherent in the life interview as a source, by interviewing a group of emigrants whose basis of collective identity was the years they had spent together in same secondary school ("Gymnasium") together.

The whole of the emigration cannot be analyzed in a single, uniform frame of interpretation, since it was subject to a number of widely varied and different acculturation processeses. One of the reasons for this may be, on one hand, the different milieu (social stratum) from which the emigants came, and on the other, the society into which they were

accepted, with its own cultural differences (Australia, USA). The immigrants themselves applied widely different individual or group-oriented strategies during their wanderings.

This may be the reason why it appeared simpler for historical studies thus far to focus on issues like how many people were involved in a wave of Hungarian emigration and where they ended up, or what kinds of action they took and what types of objectified memories the emigrants retained (for instance, parties, associations, cultural organizations, published newspapers and books), and what symbolical significance may be attributed to the establishment of these institutions and to the collection of such objects.

The research of emigrants is a legitimate field for historical, anthropological or sociological study since, by the single act of electing to emigrate, these people turned "different"; different for the emitting medium, i.e. the social environment where they came from as well as different for the environment which accepted them. First they must have felt strangers in their new countries (as immigrants), and later on possibly also in their mother country (as emigrants). It is also possible that this duality remained throughout their lives.

The emigrants are inhabitants, consumers and users of two political systems, two countries, two cultures, and two languages. Given this borderline situation between two different worlds, the question is which functions dominate: the ones that connect (in the sense of Georg Simmel's "bridge" metaphor), or the ones which divide, emphasizing the differences ("door" metaphor). The emigrants have also had a cultural transfer role, partly because of their double, or perhaps even more complicated, complex identity. Their relationship with Hungary did not suffer an ultimate break. They began to visit home regularly from the 1960s on, thus becoming intermediaries of different consumer and cultural articles and values especially in an informal, mainly family or friendly environment.

The 1956 emigration wave is also often characterised by the model now regarded as classical in the literature of migration, according which migrants, when they make up their mind about leaving, are influenced both by a "pull factor", i.e. the views they have about their future environment, and a "push factor", i.e. the way they feel in the environment which they are about to leave – in this case, for instance, the promise of the "free West" promoted by the broadcasts of Radio Free Europe, as opposed to the political oppression pervading Hungary during the Rákosi regime.

This model makes it explainable how, and under the influence of what factors the mother country – or the "emitting environment" in general – becomes unliveable for the emigrants, and what perspectives are being held out by life abroad. The model may be criticised as one which provides a subsequent explanation for the phenomenon. Those applying this model are able to understand the factors that played a part in the migration of a person or a group, but they cannot explain why, in the presence of the same conditions, others still choose to stay.

In the building of the Austrian national identity, the following may be regarded as collective identity-constructing factors: neutrality, "bridge" role (both in a geographical and political sense), a helpful attitude to the refugees, the idea of a cultural nation as different from Germany, the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, and the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Elements of the Austrian national identity are symbolically represented, for instance, by the cult of Mozart, the annual Salzburg Festival, the New Year concert, or the cult of Empress "Sissy".

The history of Austria before the signing of the 1955 State Treaty was rich in traumatic events. During the 19th century the multinational Habsburg Empire successfully fought back the independent state-founding intentions and attempts of the nations making it up, however, with the loss of the First World War, the centuries-old empire disintegrated.

With different conditions, each nation won its independence. Austria itself, however, could only become independent from the Habsburg dynasty which had lent it its independent identity. The new state found it hard to adapt to the role of a small Central European state deprived of its markets. A dangerous way out of the difficult situation and the threat of civil war was offered by Hitler's rising Reich, which united the German territories in 1938. In 1945, therefore, Austrians, playing an active role on the losing side during World War II, found themselves in a difficult and delicate situation: they had to dissociate from Germany in such a way that their participation in the horrible actions of the Nazis should be forgotten by the world at large. This feat was accomplished almost perfectly. It was only in the 1980s that it became clear on an international scale that Austria had never really faced up to its recent past.

The major role played in the evolution of Austrian identity by the successful treatment of the rush of Hungarian refugees to the Austrian border in 1956 is widely known. In October 1956, hardly more than a year after the signing of the State Treaty and the regaining of independence, Austria once again found itself in the centre of world attention. All western news agencies and other press organs reporting on the events in Hungary quartered themselves in Vienna, which was the closest and logistically handiest place for their work. During the fight for independence and especially after its fall, large numbers of political exiles were expected but their numbers were regularly underestimated. The Austrian government was once again faced with a delicate situation. The exiles had to be allowed to enter, if only out of a sense of moral obligation, since western leaders in Hungary were by then blamed not only by the freedom fighters but also by a large part of the population because, despite their much-vaunted democratic principles, they kept away from the fighting, and did not intervene on the side of Hungary.

II. Methods of Examination, Sources

Journalists and even scholars doing interviews directly after World War II looked upon oral history interviews as perfect sources revealing what happened in reality. Transcripts of the texts were held practically in the same regard as written sources, that is, once the interviews had been put into writing, their value as authentic evidence was seen as the same as that of original written documents. Authors later on abandoned the idea of a mere recording of facts, and considered interviews as cultural, social and psychological constructs rather than written documents. Relying also on the work of Paul Thomas, researchers realized that a host of small, independently existing stories would never make up a comprehensive, objective narrative. After the 1980s, partly under the influence of the linguistic turn, they began to analyze the formal characteristics of the text, its style, the reflecting of the essential substance and the manner of expression upon one another. Researchers also realized the phenomenon that the interviewers themselves were also affecting the development of the conversation; consequently it was far from irrelevant what they suggested, and how much they exposed themselves to those reminiscing. The direction and formal characteristics the interviews were taking was directly influenced by social norms, and by assumed or real expectations.

The personal identity mirrored in "I'"-stories evolves from turns of fate. As László Tengelyi put it: "The concept of fate rests on the idea that that a life-story, as the bearer of identity, is a self-enclosed whole; the term 'event of fate signifies happenings that have such an effect that the identity, as the vessel of the life-story, is split open." Looking back from today, it is by the fitting of these events of fate and their frequently changing interpretation that we re-write our past and maintain our identity. By the aid of life-story research it is possible to get relatively close to identity: the life-story narrative, listened to and re-read –

which is not the same as the identity but is nevertheless closely related to it – is being interpreted by our scholarly text. By the analysis of the life-story narrative, we attempt to show how a life-story as lived and as told influence one another, and what kind of relationship the two have to each other.

Biography research today is a method of research and a field of study spread world wide. It is not by accident, though, that its development is closely related to post World War II Germany and Italy. Éva Kovács also points out: "At stakes were the society's facing up to the memory of Nazism and Fascism. The difference was cardinal: what came into the spotlight was not the path of certain social groups, milieux and life styles but evidence by culprits, victims and eyewitnesses. And even though this essential difference has not been reflected upon by our profession up to this day, no matter where we approach it from, the angle of research or methodological corrections and innovations, it seems quite clear that this particular feature has become the driving engine of the development of the discipline. It was impossible not to view the survivors of the Shoah as victims, the culprits as simple soldiers and the eyewitnesses as simply bakers, tailors or industrial workers. "Objective" history and scholarship became pervaded with fundamental moral considerations."

The taking down and working up of narrated stories has by now become an accepted method or field of study for social-science research. Ever newer works of a scientific nature and thematic journal issues are being born in Hungary, too. The making and working up of narrated sources has become as manifold as have the ways in which they are used... We may talk – among others – about memory-keeping, scientific, evidence-providing, trauma-exposing, knowledge-disseminating and political functions, even though these functions are often intertwined and hard to separate. The texts coming into being may be completely different as to the time and place where they were born, their informative content, length and form of publication, let alone the personality of the narrators and inquirers, yet they are similar inasmuch as in every case they attempt to emphasize/reveal the individual features.

My understanding of identity is that it is a social construct changing in the course of the path of life, is associated with several groups (refugee identity. In my dissertation I analyzed the identity of a group of emigrants who left the country in a given historical situation: that of some members of the generation who were teenagers when they emigrated after the 1956 revolution. My objective was not to reconstruct events, like, for instance, precisely how many of them had gone to some of the *ad hoc* Hungarian middle schools ("*gymnasia*") springing up and created for them at the time, and did not inquire about the kind of grades they got and the jobs they were able to get in possession of those grades, but focused rather on ordinary-day history. I analyzed the types of images and stereotypes that Hungarians settled in Austria and keeping contact with Hungary would tell, in an interviews situation, about the revolution, about East and West, and about Hungary in the Kádár era, something that, family relations and frequent visits nonetheless, they were able to observe only from the outside. I also analyzed and explained what stories and why are considered as relevant when they remember. In the interview situations and the narratives I was also able to learn about the characteristics and perspectives of the integration process, that is to say, I could develop a notion about the current meaning of the 1956 emigration in a broader sense today. The basic material of my research is constituted by my narrative interviews made in 2005, which I completed with sources of a different character.

I viewed the group of students emigrating from Hungary in their teens as the "first-and-a half" generation because for most of them left their native land at their own free will and decision. On the other hand, they found themselves abroad at such a young age and that their integration promised to be a good deal faster than that of their older, first-generation fellow emigrants. I wondered about the importance of the 1956 revolution in their identity,

and, in general, about the elements from which they would put together – and also show me – their identity, one that was far from unambiguous to the outsider – or Hungarian – observer.

As far as methodology is concerned, my research on émigré Hungarians represents a kind of transition between biography research and oral history. The questioning technique applied, the biographic noting down of the interviews and the meticulous examination of langue use are more closely related to the former, however, when it comes to the analytical part, it is more apt to talk about multiple and careful reading than about consistent thematic field analysis. The interviews were not started off with a "*would you please tell me your life story*" type question, almost classical in narrative interviews. Instead of that, I rather asked my interviewees to talk to me about *how they got to Austria*. In contrast to terms like "*escape*", "*emigration*", "*leaving the country*", "*decision*", "*choice*", or most extremely, "*desertion*", I used the expression "*got to*", a relatively neutral expression undoubtedly with a hint of passivity about it, in order to avoid immediately characterizing and evaluating their emigration from Hungary. It was only after the first shorter or longer story that returned to the above mentioned elements, and asked my interviewees to explain them in detail.

The interviews were made in 2005 May and September in Austria and October 2005 in Hungary. I offered to every one of my interviewees to visit them in their homes if they would see me. In the end I was received by 13 of them in their homes. The interviews are between one and a half and two "sheets" long – that is, roughly 3000 to 6000 words – each. I interviewed them once but next year, when I asked for some photographs to be use on the Internet, I saw a number of them again. On that second occasion, with the tape-recorder off, some would also share with me some confidential information about the life of their former fellow students.

III. The Structure of the Dissertation

The introductory part of my dissertation covers the methodological problems and provides a comprehensive review of the literature of migration research and Austrian national identity. In the second chapter, the escape stories of 1956 ex-students are investigated from the aspect of the basic patterns for their depiction of their route, the refugee status, and the institutions (gymnasium, Hungarian associations, workplace) to which they were connected. I laid special emphasis on portraying how much the decision to emigrate was influenced by the given stage of life, and what kinds of motivations were cited in the interviews situation as supporting, or being against, emigration. Chapter Three focuses on an analysis of the stories connected with the student years because it seemed their common school experiences represented a strong cohesive force for my interviewees. Their group identity had been strengthened by a powerful sense of dependence upon one another. The fourth chapter is devoted mainly to the experiences told by my interviewees about the almost unlimited possibility to travel, something completely unimaginable for their Hungarian compatriots who had stayed at home. Some of my interviewees, driven by objectives of self-realization and identity search, travelled alone, while others moved in lesser or greater groups, sometimes associated with some Church association, and often for reasons of job-seeking. The fifth chapter investigates, on the basis of their experiences during their first visit home, whether this series of events is being portrayed as mirrored through the escape story or an event filling a peculiar role in their later lives. Their narratives give the impression that the circumstances of the trip, or the dates, are less precisely remembered, but the elements of the individual narratives are very similar (fear when crossing the border, being confronted with the trappings of dictatorship like barbed wire, border guards, body search, customs check, then grappling with the feelings, or sometimes with their lack, when encountering the family). In Chapter

Six, I analyse how their visits to the countries of the Soviet Bloc, first of all to Hungary, is being represented by my interviewees in their life story narratives. It appears that while early on, the memories of visiting the mother country were associated with the family and relatives, later on they turned into tourist trips and leisure-time sightseeing activities. Travel to Hungary was motivated also by financial considerations, and now they were able to visit regions of the country (the Balaton was largely preferred) which they were unable to see in their childhood and youth. It struck me in the interview situation that in connection with this subject, my interviewees were much more inclined to explain their topical political views on the current political situation in Hungary than otherwise. They told me that instead of united national action, they saw selfish trickery, discord and heavy-handed bureaucracy. The seventh chapter investigates narratives of the subsequent stages of the story of their established careers, first and foremost from the aspect as to how they became integrated into Austrian society. A contradictory element of the narratives is that although they describe the process as unobstacled, nevertheless they broke off their university studies and started again more than once, while several of them never finished at all. A few of them told me that because of insufficient academic progress, they lost their stipends, and had to take on a job to support themselves during their studies. Employment was portrayed by them as ambivalent in effect: on the on hand it aided their integration as they were making money and got acquainted with Austrians, and on the other their working time hindered the successful continuation and completion of their studies. One event of a symbolic significance for immigrants, where integration is concerned, is marriage, then the bringing up of children. A part of my interviewees married Hungarians who we also immigrants in a similar positions, and the other part married Austrians. The establishing of a family and career-building often came into a conflict during their lives. In their narratives it was often one of the two that was made responsible for failure in the other.

The biographical records, however, also reveal that out of the twenty-four people interviewed by me, nine have divorced; some after a few years of marriage, but the majority above the age of forty. When explaining the causes of the break-up their marriage, all of them referred to individual reasons – because of too much work, too little time was left for the family, or the relationship became worn out during the long years spent together – and there was no mention by anyone that the differing national background may have had any part at all in the divorce. In the eighth chapter I analyze the spheres of problems related to integration and Hungarian national awareness from the point of view of the role played by refugee identity, and Austrian and Hungarian national awareness among the identity-making factors of the subjects of my interviews. Being a refugee involves a special vulnerability. That is easy to see since refugees have to redefine, to "invent" themselves anew in a new, unfamiliar environment, while at the same time their relationship to their old environment undergoes a radical transformation. The narrators have interiorized the stereotypical features of the Austrian nation, for instance, the differences between the Austrian and Hungarian national character (temperament, bravado). Although my interviewees did not leave Hungary as revolutionary fighters in 1956, the revolutionary experiment also played a crucial part in determining their construction of their own refugee experience. For one thing, they were looked upon by the receiving environment as freedom fighters forced to flee after the victory of the dictatorial regime, and for another, they themselves could play the part, putting on the mantle of the heroic, daredevil Hungarian, acting according to the image expected by their environment which thus regarded them as extraordinary and special. That attitude may have helped them in developing ordinary-day relationships and aided their integration.

An appendix at the end of my dissertation includes the biographies put together on the basis of the interviews, and in some cases, questionnaires, for easier orientation.

IV. Results

Those fleeing to the West, including the emigrants of 1956, were people who refused to collaborate with the totalitarian regime, breaking with it instead, when they decided to leave the country. They were depicted in the official media and discourse of the Kádár regime, in the press and on film, as different, alien, that is, the enemy. This may have played a part in the efforts of the emigrants to establish political organizations and press organs, defining themselves in opposition to the regime. The emigrants went on existing as independent entities opposed to the mother country. With the softening of the Kádár regime, however, the Hungarian government wanted to make use of its former citizens both in business and as tourists.

The fundamental objective of my dissertation was to describe, through the life story narratives of Hungarian emigrants fleeing to Austria in 1956, their relationship to Hungary, their self-image, and the various identity-developing factors playing a part in their careers. From a sociological point of view, their stories exhibit more similarities than differences. They belong to the same age group; all were born around 1940. The basis of their common group identity is that they all attended secondary schools (gymnasia) established specifically for Hungarian refugees, after which they graduated as technicians or completed higher education. They married once, a few of them twice, in their lives, and the majority has two or three children. Despite all that, their stories are different; for some of them, the Hungarian national identity, their relationship to Hungary, is a stronger identity-creating element, while for others the Austrian local identity (affiliation to Vienna) is more dominant. Their political stance is, as a rule, determined by an antipathy toward communist or leftist ideologies and parties; some are affiliated with the parties of the right (though not the extreme right), while others are more attracted to the Green movement. Travel plays a central part in the life story narrative of some of my interviewees. I was told many stories about how many countries they had seen – often when visiting former classmates from the gymnasium – and what cultural experiences they had had.

Several works have been published on the migration waves and refugees; the majority of these, however, were mainly statistical in character, with the exception of a few works by, for instance, Julianna Puskás, Zoltán Fejős, Tamás Kanyó and Móra Kovács. The methodological innovation offered by my dissertation is that while making my life story interviews, I attempted to amalgamate the methods of problem-centred, social science-character and narrative biographical interviewing, since the central question raised by my work was to find out how people who had fled to Austria at a young age, when they were still going to middle school, related to their emitting environment, the mother country, and the socialist regime. I made at an attempt to explain the process by which, at the effect of emigration, their life story developed differently from the fellow students they had left behind, and consequently they built up their careers differently from those staying at home, experiencing also their ordinary days in a different way.

It was my assumption that for these reasons they would also emphasize different identity-creating factors than those of their former classmates who never emigrated. Although their migration is associated with 1956, they have no sense of identity as revolutionaries, but they do have refugee identities. Their histories also strengthened the evolution of Austrian national identity, since the receiving community was able to experience the sense of aiding neighbours poorer and unluckier than themselves, although the daily life of Austria after World War II is also considered as a difficult period in the country's national history because of the four-power occupation. The reason why in historical studies this period is described as "hard times" is also based on the fact the Austrians had been gravely afraid of losing their national sovereignty. However, because of the signing of the 1955 four-power State Treaty,

the post-World War II period is also construed by the national narrative as a success story. The Hungarian national identity of the refugees is linked in the case of some to institutions (newspaper, club, Church); while with others it is associated more with the group and with classmates in the Gymnasium. Compared to the emitting milieu, they view themselves as different, and when they visit home, they sense and emphasize the differences more than the similarities. They experience their refugee identity more in a historical context; in an interview situation they associate their own identity far more with the Austrian national identity. My subjects see their life stories as stories of evolution: from poor refugees they became Austrian citizens, and are not different from their environment. The developmental, cultural and civilizational difference between West and East is a recurrent element of symbolical significance in the lifer story narratives of my subjects. Even though in principle they ought to have been predestined to play the transfer role, they rejected it in the interview situation, and emphasized their affiliation with Austria. This is also evident from the fact that compared to Vienna; they regard Budapest as an impoverished, shabby city. The stories they tell are strongly influenced by the media; sensing the differences in the use of language in Hungary and Austria, they regard Hungarian public discourse as rough and uncivilized. The second generation is widely considered by the historical and anthropological literature as one of dual identity. In the course of my interviews, my experience was that although the parents would prefer their children not to lose their Hungarian identity completely, in reality the majority of those belonging to the second generation define their identity as Austrian. In their own time in history, my interview subjects could only rise up and achieve higher living standards in Austrian (i.e. non-Hungarian) environment. Their use of the Hungarian language shows well-recognizable differences from its use at home even in the case of those Austrian Hungarians who maintain close relations with Hungary. Few independent cultural products are created by Hungarians living in Austria, the majority of them in Vienna, so what is left for them is the cultivation of the past and imports of Hungarian culture overwhelmingly from the mother country, but also from Hungarians living in minorities in the countries of the Carpathian Basin. Despite all efforts they have no real image of a Hungarian future. The network of social contacts that still exist between members of the first generation, and can be mobilized if need be, no longer extends to the second and third generation, and with the dying out of the first generation, assimilation will significantly speed up. The cultivation of Hungarian national awareness comes to the fore again mostly in retirement, the inactive age. Its two fundamental forms are attending Hungarian cultural events and efforts to awaken a sense of Hungarian identity in the German speaking, fully Austrianized grandchildren by trying to force the everyday use of the Hungarian language.